

## **(Re)assembling the ‘normal’ in neoliberal policy discourses: tracing gender relations in the age of risk**

**Katarina Giritli Nygren**

Mid Sweden University  
Email: [katarina.giritli-nygren@miun.se](mailto:katarina.giritli-nygren@miun.se)

**Siv Fahlgren**

Mid Sweden University  
Email: [siv.fahlgren@miun.se](mailto:siv.fahlgren@miun.se)

**Anders Johansson**

Mid Sweden University  
Email: [anders.johansson@miun.se](mailto:anders.johansson@miun.se)

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to explore through a reading of an official Swedish policy document what questions and challenges such a document poses for feminist theory by the way the 'normal' is (re)assembled in accordance with what others have called the risk politics of advanced liberalism. The intensified focus on risk in neoliberalism has seen responsibility move from the state to individuals, and old divisions between society and market as well as between civil society and state are being refigured. The argument put forward here is that current modes of governance tend to neglect the complexities of present-day life courses when using a gender-'neutral' approach to social policy that is in fact the work of a gender regime.

**Keywords:** normalization, gender, risk, policy, Sweden

An actor grows with the number of relations he or she can put, as we say, in black boxes. A black box contains that which no longer needs to be considered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects – the broader the construction one can raise. (Callon & Latour, 1981, p. 285)

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore, through a reading of an official Swedish policy document, what questions and challenges such a document poses for feminist theory by the way the 'normal' is (re)assembled in accordance with what Rose (1996, 2000) and others have called the risk politics of advanced liberalism. One of its theses is that the 'normal' – for example, in regard to gender – in part could be understood as a black box like the one that Callon and Latour describe in the quote above, since what is considered 'normal' is something that no one needs to think about at any length, as long as one does not touch its boundaries, but which, on reflection, turns out to be composed of numerous ideas, thoughts, and relationships, also

materialized in performative practices. We have chosen to analyse *Swedish national reform programme 2011. Europe 2020—the EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (Swedish Prime Minister's Office 2011, hereafter Swe. 2011),<sup>1</sup> since it, as a document reflecting some kind of an EU consensus, can be seen as demonstrating some essential traits of present day policies in European liberal democracies.

The aim of the reform programme is to show how the EU strategy 'is being implemented in the national policy' (Swe. 2011: 5). It is, thus, a document that postulates that economic growth is integral to, and a prerequisite for, the government's policy as a whole. And as the formulation of the EU strategy shows, strategies for economic growth should incorporate areas such as knowledge ('smart'), environment ('sustainable'), and welfare ('inclusive'). Such 'economization' or 'marketization' is a well known fact of neoliberal governing, described by Foucault in his lectures of 1978-79 as a 'complete superimposition of market mechanisms [...] and governmental policy' (Foucault, 2008, p. 121). Given that the programme is an important policy document, that it mirrors a central EU strategy, and that it expresses a fundamental neoliberal view on economic growth as vital and integral to all areas of governmental policies, it is worth reading as presumably also exposing important aspects of how gender and normalization are being treated and made in contemporary political discourse.

Another aspect of this discourse, which a number of researchers have noted, is that 'risk' has become a central framework for describing and managing the welfare policy of today. In this perspective 'old' welfare states like Sweden have dealt with a limited amount of risk resulting from the industrial production process while in post-industrial societies, new risks fundamentally challenge old welfare states and welfare policy (Taylor-Gooby, 2006; Bonoli, 2005) which have responded with shifting some risks from the state to the individual (Hacker 2006; Marston et al. 2010). Activation policies and the changing ethical foundations of welfare have also created competing discourses of responsibility in different 'welfare-settings' in the transfer from welfare to workfare, as well as in individual responses (Dean, 2006). The penetration of market relations and of abstract systems into every aspect of the life-world compels the individual to choose. At the same time, these processes promote forms of market and

---

<sup>1</sup> The reform programmes of 2012 and 2013 largely consist of updates of the initial 2011 document.

institutional dependency. Each individual is to be her own political economy, an informed, self-sufficient consumer of labour markets, personal security markets, and other consuming interests. Within a regime of responsible risk-taking, all differences, and the inequalities that result from them, are seen as a matter of choice (Shamir, 2008). Hence, governmental risk-management (intended to reduce uncertainty about future national welfare obligations) has offloaded responsibility for welfare procurement and use to the private consumer.

Neoliberalism can, according to Lerner (2000), be discussed in three different dimensions, as policy, as ideology, and as governmentality. We are, in this article, most interested in how a neoliberal rationality of governance permeates policy discourses and how this effect gender relations. Today, the intensified focus on risk in neoliberalism has seen responsibility move from the state to individuals, and old divisions between society and market as well as between civil society and state are being refigured. However, the argument put forward here is that current modes of governance tend to neglect the complexities of present day life courses when using a gender-‘neutral’ approach to social policy (Daly, 2011; Lewis, 2005). A task for feminist theory can then be to analyse the ways liberal governmentality is productive/destructive in relation not only to freedom but also to (gender) equality. In the present article we therefore want to explore how normalization processes within current Swedish government policies can be of a challenge for feminist theoretical interest. According to Dahl (2012), there is surprisingly little written from a feminist perspective on neoliberalism in Nordic countries, although the changes brought about by this policy have had immense impact on welfare issues that have traditionally been of great importance for feminist research (p. 284). Nor has much been published on how this policy works with Nordic welfare regimes. Many researchers, both inside and outside Sweden, are unaccustomed to relating aspects of neoliberalism to the Swedish case and still see Sweden as an example of the so called ‘third way’ (Rönblom & Keisu, 2013, p. 345). Still, according to Rönblom and Keisu (2013), Sweden is one of the most privatized countries in the world, and all governmental authorities are audited in neoliberal ways (p. 345).

As we shall show in our analysis, it is very obvious that while the document addresses all kinds of reforms, the dominating discourse is an economic-market discourse. We seek to open this normalized and normalizing black box in order to analyse how this discourse has been

created by reassemblages, closures, and shifts in meaning, and the effect it has on understandings of 'normality' regarding gender, but also how gender here comes to intersect with ethnicity, and class. The questions that speak to the discourse analysis to be addressed in this article are as follows:

1. If the economic-market discourse is the one that produces most of the meaning of Swedish politics today, as well as the meaning of this political programme, *what* does this discourse predispose one to see? In other words, what is normalized by the discourse, and thus closed in the black box?

2. *How* are the discursive normalization processes inherent in this discourse performed, or what are the *conditions* for this, and what makes the discourse possible with respect to *reassemblages*, *stabilizations*, and *closures*, that is, how relations and connections become contained in the form of a structured whole, easily seen as a self-evident black box?

3. And finally, how could we discuss the possible *outcomes* of these normalization processes, or what do the discourses *do*, particularly in relation to gender (Fahlgren, 1999, 2009; Rhätzel, 2007)? We are interested in whether—and if so, how—gendered relations are (re)produced or transformed in regard to new openings or closures, particularly in a country such as Sweden, which during the previous decade was regarded as a front-runner for gender equality in the EU (Dahl, 2013).

## **Analytical framework**

In our analysis we shall discuss if the meaning of gender is (re)assembled in new ways - and thus normalized and placed in black boxes by the neoliberal marketization found in this Swedish policy document. In that case, what are the discursive *conditions* for this, and what are the possible *outcomes* of these normalization processes? Such an analysis of discourses in policy documents at the time of policy reforms is a useful method for understanding the rationale that is offered to legitimize policy changes.

By connecting the concept of normalization, as used by Foucault, with that of the black box of Callon and Latour, we want to emphasize how

they both aim at problematizing the relation between individual and society as well as the very fact that such relations are often taken for granted. Foucault's concept actually divides into two: *disciplining normalization*, which is about the imposing of norms, and *autogenetic normalization*, which belongs to biopolitics' ways of fostering processes of a population, mainly through security and risk (Foucault, 2007). What we get from Foucault is, thus, descriptions of two ways in which societal belonging has been created since the late eighteenth century, ways that can be analysed and problematized in their concretizations as ideas, practices, technologies, and so forth. In addition to these concepts, Callon and Latour's black box adds a metaphor for how processes such as these becomes naturalized or made invisible by the very idea of how a society functions today, when 'actors macro-structure reality and [...] sociologists help them to do so', to use a phrase from the title of their article.

Our point of departure is that such normalizing processes tend to render unequal power relations, for example, those of gender, invisible. Notions of normalcy of this type, but also notions of normalization, creates an integrating 'us' at the same time as it tend to exclude certain groups of people and (re)produce inequality (Fahlgren et al., 2011). In order to problematize this kind of belonging from the perspectives of feminist theory it is necessary to continue the kind of genealogical questioning of the very relations between selves and society that are found in Foucault, Cannon, and Latour, making the contingency of these relations visible, or, according to the metaphor above, picking them out of their black boxes. It is the notion that individual actors and society (or structure) fit together that has to be problematized, and this is not done by emphasizing either the freedom of individual actors or structural determination.

Liberal individualism relies on normalization as the unquestioned glue of society, and therefore upon a strong notion of societal structure. This is what Foucault means by stressing that liberal freedom depends on restrictions:

Liberalism as I understand it, the liberalism we can describe as the art of government formed in the eighteenth century, entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship [with] freedom [...]. Liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera. (Foucault, 2008, p. 64)

Our analysis requires us to trace what is reassembled under the umbrella of normalcy today in respect of gender intersecting with race/ethnicity, age, and class – and to that end, we have looked for new links, or what Latour (2005) calls movements of reassociation, that redefine the notion of normal. Actor-network theory (ANT) offers examples of how assemblages and movements of reassociation can be operationalized using the concepts *closure* and *stabilization* (Latour, 2005). Closure means that social perceptions become more similar and that other alternatives are excluded from consideration, and stabilization that a specific phenomenon in a specific social context over time becomes a matter of fact (a black box).

### **Reading the Swedish reform programme – a discourse analysis**

Since June 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy has been the EU's common strategy for growth and employment. Accordingly, since 2011, member countries have been expected to submit a national reform programme to the EU every April in which they explain their efforts to realize the European strategy at the national level. We have concentrated on the programme from 2011 because it was the first document to frame the agenda for how Sweden wanted to implement the strategy for Europe 2020 and its political consequences. Its own introductory summary demonstrates the main points of the Swedish national reform programme 2011 – 'Europe 2020 – the EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth':

The main task of economic policy in Sweden is to create the highest possible sustainable welfare by means of high sustainable growth, high sustainable employment, welfare that benefits everyone and economic stability. Economic growth must also be compatible with a good environment and health. (Swe. 2011, p. 5)

Against the background of the current economic situation – the European crisis, from which Sweden is said to be 'making a strong and rapid recovery' – the government's main aim for policy is described as 'to guide Sweden to full employment and thus reduce exclusion'. This is because the 'primary reason for social disparities is that people do not have jobs' (Swe. 2011, p. 5). The regulation of labour is thus held to be the primary aim of policy, as a result of which the government has 'given priority to jobs with further structural

measures such as a strengthened work-first principle and improvements in the functioning of the labour market' (Swe. 2011, p. 5). The 'structural' measures should therefore aim to facilitate the functioning of the labour market – the so-called 'free market'. In the process, the concepts of 'exclusion' and 'outsiderhood' ('utanförskap', a politically constructed concept used in the Swedish version) and 'work, not welfare' become bywords in neoliberal Swedish politics.

The discursive starting-point here is that economic markets form the backbone of the governmental reform programme. Their meaning and importance cannot be questioned. Nor can it be denied that, equally, they are the basis for any consideration of what policy is or should be. An economic-market discourse is, thus, not very surprisingly (we are not trying to expose any hidden agenda), the governing discourse for the entire governmental reform programme. This new way of thinking about what reform is – no longer a direct intervention in, for example, social politics, but in its marketized surroundings – has been most deeply investigated by research following Foucault that focuses on neoliberal governmentality. Mitchell Dean (2010) calls it 'a form of government through the economy' (p. 145), and Nikolas Rose (1999) states that all 'aspects of *social* behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines' (p. 141). Central to this discourse, as the cited summary shows, is the idea of the market as having the ability of creating nothing less than a society in the form of a harmonic totality. This idea is taken for granted, without any discussion of problems or conflicts at any point in the programme, and therefore becomes a kind of black box that never has to be opened. It thus appears that there is only one way to go, along a pathway that appears to be inevitable (cf. Davies et al., 2005).

In congruence with this, the document's use of the concept of 'normal' tends to slide from the valued *ideal* to the *ordinary* (or statistically normal), which is constituted as the *opposite of deficiency*, a deviation or a social problem (cf. Hacking, 1990). The 'normal' comes to stand for an ideal of equilibrium, or, rather, the balance of an organic whole: '[i]n the emerging economies, resource utilisation is near normal' (Reg, 2011, p. 9); 'interest rate differentials [...] continue to be somewhat higher than normal. This indicates that financial market conditions have not yet fully normalised' (Reg, 2011, p. 9); 'potential GDP are expected to grow at a more normal pace' (Reg, 2011, p. 13); 'normal adjustment for inflation'(Reg, 2011, p. 43). Political regulations aim at obtaining the normal, with a strong analogy to the medical concept of normal health: 'Requirements for admission to a national



programme will be tightened so that students are better prepared for their studies and thus have better chances of completing their education in normal time' (Swe. 2011, p. 31f.).

The notion of the normal is thus tightly connected to the way the market underpins all policies, the main objective being, according to the reform programme, 'full employment and thus [reduced] exclusion' (Swe., 2011, p. 28). Thus, the greatest threat or risk is defined as 'exclusion', here taken to mean lacking paid work in a given labour market. Who then is identified as being 'at risk' of this outsiderhood, and thus of not being part of the normal? The answer is those who have been signed on with the Employment Service for long periods, especially 'some groups, such as young people, older people, the foreign-born, people with disabilities that impair their capacity to work, and people with no more than a pre-upper secondary school education, have a relatively weak foothold in the labour market' (Swe., 2011, p. 20). The groups mentioned, along with everyone who 'is at risk of becoming sick or unemployed for shorter or longer periods' and '[y]oung adults and the foreign-born, who have not yet got a firm foothold in the labour market' (Swe., 2011, p. 21), are thus all categories described as being 'at risk' in the labour market. What we see here is that the programme designates the outsiderhood-position as a risk category that is understood in relation to the market, and relational concepts such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, and age become recoded as risk factors to be administered by politics in order to avoid exclusion, or outsiderhood.

The identification of people with a weak foothold in the labour market is not related to any form of structural inequality; instead, the processes and dynamics of risk and causation are reduced to the individual level, and as such they become translated into direct personal lifestyles and behaviours attributable to the individual 'at risk'. The very concept of exclusion is here reduced to economic terms: not at work, not profitable, and therefore something that can be administered through means of making the market function. The way to reduce outsiderhood is duly thought to be to strengthen the so-called work, not welfare approach, for example by using earned income tax credits (giving more money to those already in work), and by reforming social security (which basically in this case means cutting the welfare system and forcing individuals reliant upon it into work). Framed by the market discourse, the welfare state's watchwords – welfare, equity, gender equality, justice – implicitly acquire new meanings. Meanings are shifting towards a neoliberal

interpretation, far from the welfare-policy interpretations of the twentieth century, and are possibly renormalized by the market discourse. In one passage of the governmental text, for example, Swedes are depicted as almost already being (gender) equal, a position that will be safeguarded by ensuring that a fair distribution of welfare is adjusted to the market (implicit in words such as 'choice' and 'access') so that it can offer better and more quality:

A fair distribution of the welfare is a key starting point. Sweden will safeguard its position as one of the world's most equitable and gender-equal countries. The Government has carried out a number of reforms to improve quality, provide more freedom of choice and increase the accessibility of welfare. (Swe., 2011, p. 17)

The concept of exclusion, or outsiderhood, while retaining connotations of the ideas of the welfare state and its ideals of inclusion, makes it possible to shift away from the political meanings of the concepts used in the welfare state – away from, for example, 'social problems', 'vulnerable groups', 'non-privileged groups', 'social exclusion', and others that denote so much more than just 'no job' (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2002). It was such groups that set power relations and political struggle in motion in specific ways. Identity politics, of course, has had its problems, but the way in which different identity groups could raise questions about power has more or less disappeared in the new political discourse. For example, questions of (gender) equality are no longer being depicted as questions of power or political dispute, or indeed disagreement between the sexes or between different economic or ethnic groups (cf. Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012), but as nothing more than a matter of having the same job openings.

Providing more women and men with the opportunity to get a job is a matter of fundamental fairness. There is no divide as great as that between those who have work and those excluded from the labour market. So that everyone has the same chance to shape their own lives, it must be possible for women and men, like all groups, to enter the labour market. This is not only crucial from a fairness perspective, but also for effective use of society's resources (Swe., 2011, p. 19).

The question of justice becomes a matter of how one is positioned in the labour market and the efficient use of market resources. In this way, gender (in)equality becomes an issue that can be administered

within the realms of the market. This, again, is an example of how a new closure of gender, politics, and ethics is taking place within the economic-market discourse. The rationale of the welfare state was that the social technologies it used were intended to civilize or normalize individuals or groups (not always in ways appreciated by them (see for example, Fahlgren, 2009), turning them into citizens with duties to fulfil in exchange for certain guarantees against uncertainty. But the market discourse means that the political climate no longer requires one to carry out (welfare) interventions. Rather, it is deemed necessary to put 'structural' measures in place to encourage the market to function better; hence, the government will, as we have already seen, give 'priority to jobs with further structural measures such as a strengthened work-first principle and improvements in the functioning of the labour market' (Swe., 2011, p. 5). Courtesy of the market discourse, the exercise of politics becomes the administration of the market in order to improve and facilitate the market's functioning: 'To reduce exclusion, increase sustainable employment and make it more attractive to start and run a business, the Government wants to reinforce the in-work tax credit' (Swe., 2011, p. 28).

With political issues now left to the autogenetic operations of the market, the *power hierarchies* that were previously the subject of political conflict (cf. Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012), for example, with regard to gender relations, have been depoliticized and reformulated in market terms. What we see is a new form of governmentality, one where politics is re-made as administration, and, because of the individualization this allows, conflicting social groups seem to disappear. The structural and growth-promoting measures advocated are therefore not reforms of welfare, or even politics, but rather aim to facilitate entrepreneurship and to enable individuals to take care of themselves in the market. The basic problem – so-called outsiderhood – is individualized and privatized and unemployment has been turned into a question of individual motivation. Hence, coaching is one way to motivate people to find employment:

To encourage people to look for work more actively, coaching initiatives at the Public Employment Service have been expanded [...] Coaching for the unemployed is individualised help aimed at supporting a high level of job search activity. (Swe. 2011, 23).

The government's policy has thus been to take 'measures to ensure that the unemployed remained motivated and employable' (Swe., 2011, p. 22), which has led to an increase in activity and fewer sick reports:

The extensive reform of sickness insurance carried out in the Government's previous term of office has had good results. The sick leave process has become more active. Fewer individuals are on sick leave and periods of illness are of shorter duration. There has been a 20 per cent decline in the number of people with sickness compensation. All in all, the decline in ill-health has led to a sharp drop in exclusion. (Swe. 2011, p 28)

Individual responsibility thus legitimizes the administration of outsiderhood. Even ill health can be administered into non-existence by market forces, and it becomes a moral code for the individual to stay or become healthy. This is justified by the way the market discourse replaces identities that connote political strife with an all-embracing concept denoting those that *happen* to be outside. The normal, 'not at risk' but rather 'insider-position', is, however, if one looks a little closer at the cited parts above, gendered (not a woman), ethnified (not foreign born), and aged (neither too young nor too old), sound in mind and body, and with a strong position in the labour market. So, although the risk categories created are so numerous that it becomes difficult to see how one might possibly avoid falling into one of them at some point in one's life – making fear of falling by the wayside rife and all-embracing – the unmarked, normal, position of belonging is structured through implicit power relations.

By reading the reform programme we can see how neoliberalism and gender equality are articulated together. (Gender) equality is not depicted as a question of power or political dispute, or indeed disagreement between the sexes or between different economic or ethnic groups. Instead it becomes rewritten as the policy of fair distribution and redefined here entirely in administrative terms as something that can be administered within the realms of the market. In the next section, we shall discuss what makes this neoliberal gender politics possible in relation to reassemblages, stabilizations, and closures and we shall argue that it works through a reassembling of welfare concepts, which stabilizes depolitization and conflates individualization and privatization.

## **Reassembling welfare concepts, depoliticization, individualization, and privatization**

As we have seen in the previous section, a construct such as 'outsiderhood' cannot alone support the market discourse's legitimization; for such a pronounced market discourse to have any sort of legitimacy in a welfare society such as Sweden's, the meaning of the old, politically privileged terms such as 'welfare reform', 'justice', 'equality', and 'gender equality' (jämställdhet) must be written into the market discourse, acquiring new meanings in the process. Reforms of the type supported by the market discourse are, however, entirely different in nature from those advocated within the welfare discourse. Any 'scope for reform' should, according to the governmental programme, 'be used for structurally warranted reforms which strengthen employment and improve the functioning of the economy. The Government will thus give priority to measures that ensure sound growth by pursuing a tax and business policy promoting growth' (Swe., 2011, p.16).

The concept of reform, which in welfarism meant (welfare) interventions with normalizing and perhaps also equalizing ambitions on behalf of vulnerable groups (Fahlgren et al., 2011), now comes to mean structural measures to enable the market to operate according to the notion of a free market. Faced with the primacy of the economy, the term 'reform' has shifted meaning and reassembled, reduced to a desire to manage the market and facilitate its proper functioning. A new closure could also be said to have arisen from the concept of reform, for reform here (unlike welfare reforms) should *promote growth* in the market:

Income taxes for low and middle income earners have been reduced in four stages via the in-work tax credit, the social security systems have been reformed to support a return to work and reduce the risk of exclusion and important initiatives have been taken to improve various parts of the education system. (Swe., 2011, p. 22)

The policy of fair distribution is redefined here entirely in administrative terms as something that can be administered, and, at the same time, the question of equality seems to become nothing but a question of distribution, individual choice, and availability. According to the logic of the market discourse, the challenge of politics has become the challenge of working with at-risk groups

All the talk of the *risk* of outsiderhood thus becomes the node at which *marketization* and subsequent *depoliticization* and *privatization* take place – the node that separates *inside* from *outside*, and legitimizes individualization, individual responsibility, and ‘individualized assistance’. Under these circumstances, the normalization sought by the welfare state with its cure or reform of clients, patients, or individuals (see for example Rose, 1996, p. 349) – of which vulnerable groups could sometimes demand a share (Fahlgren et al., 2011) – has been decoupled from its previous meanings caused by a shift in vocabulary where outsiderhood replaces other concepts and distinctions.

### **The possible outcomes of shifting governmentalities**

In our analysis we have shown how *exclusion* and *outsiderhood* function as routine description of certain kinds of subject positions. The managerial focus on *risk* works to individuate differences and conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities. *Unemployment* is reproblematised as a lack of individual, marketable skills on the part of the unemployed (individualized), to be counteracted by a multitude of private coaching organizations that compete in the market for public contracts. The social logic of the Swedish welfare bureaucracy has been replaced by the new logic of individual competition, market segmentation, and service management – a market for exclusion, not inclusion. In the reshaping of the Swedish Welfare Model, a new type of public governance has emerged (see also Larsson et al., 2012 for a similar way of reasoning), with risk, primarily in relation to the economy, the labour market, and safety, used to drive the system shift. Normalization, as it was produced under welfarism, has been decoupled from its old meanings and the language of social reform has shifted.

The Swedish government’s official policy can thus be seen as an example of how, as Rose (1996) writes, ‘government of a whole range of previously social apparatuses is restructured according to a particular image of the economic – the market’ (p. 340). With the concept of risk, processes of normalization become coupled with the market and somehow decoupled from society. The separation of market from society that was present in Swedish welfare politics is here refigured, or maybe dissolved. The meaning of normalization has

changed from being a question of including people in society to a question of making individuals choose the 'right' way on the market. Through individualism and risk management, the general (statistical) level becomes intertwined with individual risk behaviour. The market, ethics, risk, and normality blend into one another and become mutually constitutive. According to Foucault (2008) the neoliberal change consists of the market becoming a model for societal organization at large, not only in the form of exchange but even more as competition (p. 121). In accordance with this change, political interventions are limited to what ensures that the market works and becomes nothing but administration or, as Foucault phrases it, 'active policy without state control' (p. 133).

The state is not less active, but its involvement is restricted to creating the framework and the conditions for the market to function freely. When policy documents are formulating dangers and risks in a community, 'the normal' is, in a silent way, reassembled as *not* being 'at risk', an assemblage that constantly becomes even narrower and more difficult, if not impossible, to uphold in one's desperation not to be positioned within 'the outsiderhood'. For when does one know that one is *not* 'at risk'? How should one define *inclusion*? The word *insiderhood* is not even used. On these points, the market discourse has nothing to say – or rather, it is silent. To be 'normal', or an insider, only seems to be defined as *not* being *at risk* – as if those people could form a neutral, unified group of 'us' with no internal conflicts or power structures or relations.

In this way, the normal position is not depicted as a gender, or a class, or a race-defined position – as if the market does not create privileged locations from which some individuals actually never need to seek a job; as if, for example, a black, working-class man with a foreign name might enjoy the same opportunities and choices that a white, middle-class man has when it comes to inclusion in a European work context. To be administered and forced into the labour market so as not to be considered at risk is the implicit future prospect of those who cannot secure their livelihoods and their purchasing power in the market – as if these power hierarchies no longer existed; as if they did not still prop up the structures of power, inequality, and injustice; as if women's and men's positions in the labour market did not differ in Sweden; as if most women did not have jobs in the ailing public sector or men in the so-called market that is the private sector; as if women's pay were not 80 per cent of men's; as if the Swedish labour market were not racialized, and so on. Structural inequalities not only in respect of

gender, but also race/ethnicity and class have existed and do continue to exist, but they are made invisible in this document. The market discourse legitimates practices of acting 'as if' a certain relationship of equality already pertains, even when it patently does not. Acting 'as if' is, according to Asplund (1987), tantamount to playing games. In this case, it is a serious game played with people's lives, because the identification of certain individuals as members of 'at-risk' groups without exploring or naming any of the structural forces that creates certain groups, often in direct comparison with others, is connected to both implicit and explicit gender, racial, and class implications (Aradau, 2004; Fahlgren, 2011; Rose, 2008; Lupton, 2012). It may look like a game but is the work of a gender regime.

In the policy document in question, gender equality has been translated and re-articulated in relation to discourses of neoliberalism, and therefore also subjected to the possibilities and the restrictions inherent in the kind of freedom these policy discourses produce. By making individual freedom of choice the very ground of politics and gender equality something 'we' have already accomplished, neoliberal discourses tend to mystify and obscure the need for and impact of feminist theory and political practice.

### **Normalization, risk, and the (im)possibility of feminist critique: some conclusions**

The strategy document mirrors the fact that market and consumption have become the new mechanisms for shaping conduct (Rose, 1996, p. 343). The result of shifting the responsibility for citizens' welfare from the state to the individual is greater individual competition that actively increases individual vulnerability (Davies, 2011, p. x). Being 'at risk' thus tends to be described as personal failures, an individual who lacks the cognitive, emotional, practical, or ethical skills to take personal responsibility for rational self-management. The risk of what here has been called outsiderhood has become the driving force behind normalization. The threat of outsiderhood, regarded as the most serious predicament in contemporary Swedish society, sustains people's willingness to pursue normalization, spurred on by strong feelings of fear of outsiderhood, but also by individual guilt, and shame (Davies, 2011; Fahlgren et al., 2014). Individualization conceals processes of normalization beneath the cloak of individual choice; in doing so, it makes them even more powerful and almost impossible to criticize, since freedom and individual choice are seen as something



everyone desires. Thus, the operations of normalization processes work to obscure their functioning, making any critique of both the underlying assumptions and their operationalization almost impossible (Fahlgren et al., 2011). In this way, structural inequalities such as gender, but also class and race/ethnicity, are mystified, made invisible and depoliticized.

The character of normalcy has always been dependent on its context, to the extent that it has never been possible to rest secure in the knowledge that one is 'normal' (Hacking, 1995; Sandell, 2001). Yet now there is virtually no obvious or unified normalcy to seek or adhere to; it is something one must continuously 'make' or perform as an individual. But this does not make the normalization processes less important. Rather it could be said that we are witnessing an intensification of normalization at the moment – one which involves a focus on the body and its perfectibility.

It is through the framework of risk that power reaches all aspects of life through subjective internalization and normalization, but also draws the boundaries between those who need to be safeguarded against risk and those whose lives are expendable. The use of risk, risk calculations, and risk prevention becomes a kind of normalizing politics that connects human bodies with policy issues and constitutive power. But in the very act of defining what should be considered a risk, other risks are hidden and silenced.

From which position, then, under the sway of this governmentality can feminist questions be asked? From which position can one conduct a political struggle for equality? If we are all said to make free, individual choices about everything in life, choices which each and everyone of us has to stand for, a critical position becomes difficult to see. The notion of a common, political struggle in the spirit of solidarity recedes.

In this present study, we have taken the current dominating neoliberal market discourse to be not 'normal' and most of all not inevitable. We have tried to prise open the normalized black box of this discourse to show how it has been made and what it may do, looking at how the politics of normalization processes have reassembled the meaning of normality, especially in regard to gender, race/ethnicity, and class, in a Swedish neoliberal context. Such a critique may enable us to break loose from the habitual practices by which an often unequal, unfair, globalized world is produced.

## References

- Asplund, J. (1987). *Det sociala livets elementära former* [Elementary forms of social life]. Göteborg: Korpen.
- Aradau, C. (2004). The perverse politics of four-letter words: risk and pity in the securitisation of human trafficking. *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 33(2), 251–77.
- Bononi, G. (2005). The politics of new social policies: providing coverage against new social risks in mature welfare states, *Policy and Politics*, 33(3), 431-449.
- Callon, M. & Latour, B. (1981). Unscrewing the big Leviathan, or how do actors macrostructure reality and how sociologists help them to do so. In K. Knorr & A. Cicourel (Eds.), *Advances in social theory and methodology. Toward an integration of micro and macro sociologies*, pp. 277–303. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Carbin, M. & Rönnblom, M. (2012). Jämställdhet i akademien – en avpolitiserad politik? [Gender equality in the academy: depoliticized politics?]. *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap* [Journal of Gender Studies], 1–2, 75–94.
- Dahl, H. (2012) Neo-liberalism meets the Nordic welfare state – gaps and silences. *NORA*, 20(4), 283-288.
- Daly, M. (2011). What adult worker model? A critical look at recent social policy reform in Europe from a gender and family perspective. *Social Politics* 18(1), 1-23.
- Davies, B., Brown, J., Gannon, S., Honan, E., & Somerville, M. (2005). Embodied women at work in neo-liberal times and places. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12(4), 343-362.
- Davies, B. (2011). Preface. In Fahlgren, S., Johansson, A. & Mulinari, D. 2011. (Eds.) *Normalization and 'outsiderhood'. Feminist Readings of a Neoliberal Welfare State*. (pp. iii-v) Shajah; Bentham eBooks.
- Dean, M. (2010) *Governmentality – power and rule in the modern society* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dean, H. (2006). Activation policies and the changing ethical foundations of welfare. In ASPEN/ETUI conference: activation policies in the EU, 20-21 Oct, Brussels, LSE, available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3784/>
- Fahlgren, S. (1999). *Det sociala livets drama och dess manus. Diskursanalys, kön och sociala avvikelser*. [A drama of social life and its manuscript. Discourse analysis, gender and social aberrations]. Umeå University, Department of Social Work, diss. nr. 29.

- Fahlgren, S. (2009). Discourse analysis of a childcare drama. *Time & Society*, 18(2–3), 208–230.
- Fahlgren, S. (2011). 'About getting a daily life going: social work, time and normalization. In Fahlgren, S., Johansson, A. & Mulinari, D. 2011. (Eds.) *Normalization and 'outsiderhood'*. *Feminist Readings of a Neoliberal Welfare State*. (pp. 28-38) Sharjah; Bentham eBooks.
- Fahlgren, S., Johansson, A., Giritli Nygren, K. and Söderberg, E. (2014). Neoliberalism – A regime of fear? In E. Söderberg and S. Nylén (Eds.), *Walking beside: Challenging the role of emotions in normalization*, (pp. 106-113), Genusstudier vid Mittuniversitetet, rapport 6.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population*. London: Palgrave.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hacking, I. (1990). *The taming of chance*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hacking, I. (1991). *The social construction of what?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Hacking, I. (1995). The looping effects of human kinds. In D. Sperber, D. Premack, & A. J. Premack (Eds.), *Casual cognition: a multidisciplinary approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hacker, J. (2006). *The great risk shift: the assault on American jobs, families, health care, and retirement*. Oxford University Press. New York.
- Hannah-Moffat, K. & O'Malley, P. (Eds.). (2007). *Gendered risks*. London: Routledge Cavendish.
- Johansson, A. (2011). Democratic values as normal values. In S. Fahlgren, A. Johansson & D. Mulinari (Eds.) *Normalization and 'outsiderhood': Feminist Readings of a Neoliberal Welfare State* (pp 80-90). Sharjah, U.A.E.: Bentham eBooks.
- Kelly, P. (2006). The entrepreneurial self and 'youth at-risk': exploring the horizons of identity in the twenty-first century'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(1), 17–32.
- Kelly, P. (2007). Governing individualized risk biographies: New Class Intellectuals and the problem of youth at-risk. *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 39–53.
- Kelly, P. (2010). The brain in the jar: troubling the truths of discourses of adolescent brain development, in TASA (Ed.), *TASA 2010* :

*Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Australian Sociological Association 2010*, pp. 1–11. Sydney, NSW: TASA.

- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social. An introduction to Actor–Network–Theory*. New York: OUP.
- Larner, W. (2000). Neo-liberalism: policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy*, 63, 5-26.
- Larsson, B., Letell, M. & Thörn, H. (Eds.). (2012). *Transformations of the Swedish welfare state: from social engineering to governance?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Levitas, R. (2005). *The inclusive society? Social exclusion and new labour*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Lewis, J. (2005). The changing context for the obligation to care and to earn. In M. Maclean (Ed.), *Family Law and Family Values* (pp. 59–80). Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Lupton, D. (1999). *Risk and sociocultural theory*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Lupton, D. (2012). Precious cargo. *Critical Public Health*, 22(3), 329–40.
- Marston, G., Moss, J., Quiggin, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Risk, welfare and work*. Melbourne: MUP.
- Meeuwisse, A. & Swärd, H. (2002). *Perspektiv på sociala problem* [Perspectives on social problems]. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
- Petersen, A. & Lupton, D. (1996). *The new public health: health and self in the age of risk*. London: SAGE.
- Pickard, S. (2009). Governing old age. *Sociology*, 43(1), 67–84.
- Rose, N. (1996). The death of the social? Refiguring the territory of government. *Economy and Society*, 25(3), 327–356.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: reframing political thought*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Rose, N. (2000). Government and control. *British Journal of Criminology*, 40(2), 321–339.
- Rose, N. (2001a). The politics of life itself. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 1–30.
- Rose, N. (2001b). Community, citizenship and the Third Way. In D. Merydyth & J. Minson (Eds.), *Citizenship and cultural policy* (pp. 1-17). London: SAGE.

- Rose, N. (2008). Race, risk and medicine in the age of 'your own personal genome'. *BioSocieties*, 3(4), 425–41.
- Rätzel, Nora. (2007). Kön och rasism i diskurser [Gender and racism in discourses]. In K. Sandell & D. Mulinari (Eds.), *Feministiska interventioner* [Feminist interventions]. pp. 321-358. Stockholm: Atlas Akademi.
- Rönblom, Malin & Keisu, Britt-Inger. (2013). Constructions of innovation and gender equality in Swedish universities. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 5(3), 342–356.
- Sandell, K. (2001). *Att (åter)skapa 'det normala': Bröstoperationer och brännskador i plastikkirurgisk praktik* [(Re)creating 'the normal': breast operations and burn injuries in plastic-surgery practice]. Linköpings universitet, Institutionen för tema, Tema Genus.
- Schmauch, U. & Giritli Nygren, K. (2012). The hidden boundaries of everyday place. Migrants, homeplace and the spatial practices of a small Swedish town. *ACME, International e-journal for Critical Geographies*, 13(2), 372-393
- Statistics Sweden. (2012). *Women and men in Sweden: facts and figures*. Stockholm: Statistics Sweden.
- Shamir, R. (2008). The age of responsabilization, economy and society, 37(1), 1–19.
- Swedish national reform programme 2011. Europe 2020 – the EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. Report/Swedish Prime Minister's Office, 2011.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (2006). Social divisions of trust: scepticism and democracy in the GM nation? Debate. *Journal of Risk Research*, 9(1), 75–95.
- Young, J. (1999). *The exclusive society*. London: SAGE.